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ABSTRACT

Typically, teachers approach ambiguity in student writing by suggesting that students focus on diction, syntax, and writing format; however, the works of modernists (including T.S. Eliot, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Marx, and Pablo Picasso) suggest the importance of conceptions of semantic clarity. Transformational models for syntactic elements in deep and surface structures of language expose the need for similar models describing semantic dimensions of clarity. The following elements, which employ terms from transformational grammar, exemplify the deep structure's influence upon clarity and ambiguity: (1) Are words functioning referentially in the deep structure; i.e., are there clear referents and referential functions? (2) Is the use of words truth functional? (3) Is the use of words based on reported or stipulated uses? (4) What is the degree of conventionality in the linguistic and nonlinguistic contextual conditions for the uses of words? (5) What are the degrees of tolerance in the use of words? These elements reflect a modernist interpretation of deep structure and point up the importance of pedagogical approaches that focus on meaning. (GW)

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Semantic Elements in Deep Structures as Seen from a Modernist Definition of Clarity*

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Typically, teachers approach ambiguity and vagueness in student writing by suggesting that students use concrete words, that they use fewer modifiers, that they use a greater number of simple sentences, that they the use written expressions having the sound of everyday speech, and that they use personal experience in their writing. Avoiding comment upon the potential ambiguity in the topic itself or upon contradiction in the premises from which the students write, these suggestions usually focus upon what happens to ideas as the writer chooses his or her diction, syntax, and format. The topic itself and the writer's premises escape attention. Outside the classroom, current professional literature and research on the teaching of writing likewise affirm the importance of syntactic flexibility, sentence combinations, self-expression, the composing process, and the importance of effective exposition and persuasion. Definitions of clarity as suggested by the work of modernists such as T. S. Eliot, Wittgenstein, Karl Marx, Picasso, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Jung have not received the attention they might.

Modernists' writings suggest that conceptions of clarity are as important as syntactic and rhetorical techniques so well studied by theorists and practitoners. Specific to the teaching of English, generative

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grammar with its use of the terms "deep, and surface structure" exemplifies its sympathy with modernist elements, written by Ludwig Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations. Transformational models for syntactic elements in the deep and surface structures of language expose the need for similiar models describing semantic dimensions of clarity. The definition of clarity below and the accompanying identification of five elements employ terms from transformational grammar in order to present the framework of a modernist understanding of clarity. Defining clarity as the generation of a force through the uses of words in a language game and using the metaphor of deep and surface structure in sentences, this essay identifies bases of ambiguity and clarity in the deep structure. As the definition implies, ideas present in the deep structure are "generated" through transformations into the surface structure. Pedagogically, the definition suggests that ambiguity in surface structures has roots in the deep structure and must be addressed at that level first.*

As indicated by the following questions, five elements exemplify the deep structure's influence upon clarity and ambiguity. Since there may be either greater or fewer elements, these are considered exemplary of modernist perspectives. (1) Are words functioning referentially? (2) Is the use of words truth functional?** (3) Is the use of words based on reported or stipulated uses? (4) What is the degree of conventionality in the linguistic and nonlinguistic contextual conditions for the uses

*For an understanding of the other parts of the definition, consult William Alston's summary of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (force) in his book Philosophy of Language and Wittgenstein's remarks about language games in Philosophical Investigations and in The Blue and Brown Books.

**The first two questions and the elements they approach seem logically inseparable such that in many cases an answer to the one entails an answer to the other.

of words? (5) What are the degrees of tolerance in the use of words? Influencing and supporting meaning in their surface structures, these elements from the deep structure should be used when deciding upon the standards of clarity for individual pieces of writing.

As the first question suggests, determining whether or not words function referentially in the deep structure entails a search for objects to which the words might refer. Taken in order, the words "Statue of Liberty," "Robert Kennedy," "Hamlet," "monuments," "anger," "freedom," "because," and "of" represent the difficulty with which referents are identified and the difficulty with which reasons are given in order to explain the presence of a referential function in the deep structure. In cases when clear referents seem to be present as well as when a referential function cannot be established, the search for a referential function breaks into two parts: what is the verifiability of the alleged referential function, and what is the validity or the importance of the referential function, if verfication seems plausible? Together, these two questions examine possible referential functions in the deep structure and suggest that a reader's judgement about ambiguity and clarity in surface structures should be dependent upon the appropriateness or inappropriateness of demanding clear, referential functions for all words in the deep structure.* Recognition of nonreferential functions in the deep structure calls for a reinterpretation and redefinition of ambiguity in the surface structure and for strategies of clarity which are NOT based upon the belief that the meaning and clarity of words are dependent upon their ability to refer.

*Some semanticists argue that the meaning of all words depends upon referential functions, but others disagree.

The second element in the deep structure concerns whether or not the use of words is truth functional. In "Suicide is a immortal sin," the sentence and its words can be subjected to tests of the verifiability and validity of referential relationships. In "Suicide is the best choice the individual," the sentence and its words are subject to considerable more debate, for verifiability and validity hinge upon the peculiarities of an individual's personality and upon hypothetical metaphysical entities. Most likely, the use of words in the second sentence is not truth functional--or at least less so than in the first. Uses of words which appear not to be truth functional in the deep structure do not depend upon either truth functions or referential functions in the deep structures of sentences in which they occur. The clarity of a sentence is sometimes entirely dependent upon uses of words which are not truth functional.

The third exemplary element in the deep structure appears to teachers and students of writing when the writer's relationship to the words' histories is questioned. Are the words' meanings stipulated or are they based upon reported uses? In some degree, the meanings of many words are negotiated with the reader so that the writer's reliance on stipulated meanings becomes clear. In the deep structure of unclear writing could lie an author's reliance on stipulated meanings, something accomplished writers handle well--something beginning writers and some teachers fail to see or fail to use successfully. Similar to the presence of the other elements in the deep structure, the presence and the importance of reported and stipulated meanings ought to influence any reader's standards of clarity and a teacher's suggestions for choices of words in the surface structure. While stipulated meanings should be clear, their

patterns of clarity and their appearance of clarity differ greatly from uses of reported meanings.

Clarity in the deep structure is also tied to the degree of conventionality in the nonlinguistic and linguistic contextual conditions. In "Please shut the door," nonlinguistic contextual conditions include the presence of but one open door, at least two people who know that a request is being made, ability on the part of the hearer to shut the door, and so on. Linguistic contextual conditions include a referential relationship between the word "door" and the door, knowledge that the word "please" establishes or maintains a particular relationship of respect between speaker and hearer, belief that the word "the" has no semantic function, and recognition that the word "shut" marks one among many actions in the hearer's repertoire. In "Please shut the door," highly conventional conditions make the achievement of clarity both easy and apparent; but in other uses of words, the contextual conditions may be unconventional, the standards of clarity unusual, and the achievement of clarity problematic.

Degrees of tolerance is the fifth element in the deep structure. Machines' degrees of tolerance are measured and controlled; and some machines demand high degrees of tolerance, but others afford only microscopic tolerance levels. Think of the differences between the gristmills of the 19th century on one hand and a modern timepiece on the other hand. Like the parts of machines, uses of words have differing degrees of tolerance. In the deep structure of some sentences lies the assumption that only with a high degree of tolerance can a particular use of words become both clear and effective.

To students and teachers of grammar on one hand and to modern semanticists on the other hand, elements in the deep structure mark the importance of pedagogical approaches which concern themselves with meaning as well as with basic epistemological and semantic premises which are part of the generation of sentences. Furthermore, the particular elements selected here as exemplary reflect a modernist interpretation of the deep structure. Such an interpretation argues that clarity itself needs definition and that the lack of clarity in student writing more than likely reflects shifts in the state of clarity in the modern world, a state which is most quickly revealed by an examiniation of the use of words in the deep rather than in the surface structure of language.

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